

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
Arlington Street Church
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Healing Places

Dr. Esther Sternberg's father survived a Russian concentration camp, immigrated to Canada, and became a pioneer of nuclear medicine. She tells this story:

“I was very small, probably in [first or second grade], and I was sitting at breakfast with my father, outside on the terrace.... [H]e used to read while he ate breakfast, and there was probably a mystery story propped up against his coffee mug. And he looked up from his [book] – it was early spring – ... looked at me and ... said, ‘Listen to the sounds of peace.’

“... I had no idea what he meant.

“... All I could hear was a dog barking, and the pock-pock of a tennis ball ... at the courts across the street, and the birds chirping.... I only understood many, many years later that ... he was only about ten years away from the war, from World War II....

Esther Sternberg continues, “And my mother, [too; she] and her siblings had escaped literally in the last moments, when the trains were leaving Rumania, Germany....

“[So we'd be] washing the dishes, you know, after dinner, and we really couldn't see the sunset from our house, but you could tell ... it was going to be a beautiful sunset. So we'd all drop everything, and my father would drive us to the top of the hill where the University of Montreal [is,] and we'd sit and look at the sunset.... [M]y parents explicitly instilled in me the knowledge that we should look, hear, smell, touch everything in our ...

environment, and savor it.... They actually said ... to me a number of times, especially [about] the sunset: Look at it as if it's your last.”¹

Dr. Sternberg grew up to be an immunologist who specializes in the ways in which we can be healed by our surroundings; by sights, sounds, smells, places; healed, even, by memories of these experiences, tapping in to “our brain’s own internal pharmacies.” Her most recent book is entitled *Healing Spaces: The Science of Place and Well-Being*.

Healing professionals have always known that when a patient begins to show interest in something beyond their illness, healing has begun. In 1984, environmental psychologist Roger Ulrich conducted a study he called *The View from a Window*. Controlling all the other variables, he randomly assigned hospital patients to beds with either a view of a brick wall or a view of a grove of trees, and then studied how much pain medication they required and how long they had to stay in the hospital. You know the outcome: on average, patients who looked out on the grove of trees were in less pain and left the hospital a day earlier.

“... [W]hy not put the individual who needs to heal into the most healing environment,” asks Dr. Sternberg, “[where they] have positive emotional memories, [and there are light and color and beautiful sounds and social supports?] ... [When t]he stress response is not activated,” she explains, patients are “likely to release ... anti-pain molecules and ... dopamine molecules of reward ... that will allow [them] to heal.

“Do the maximum that you can,” she counsels, “with things like meditation and yoga and prayer to help amplify these pathways in the brain that we know, ultimately, can help the immune system do its job to heal.”

Dr. Sternberg notes that we know we love beauty – it doesn’t occur to us to complain that, say, hotel rooms with a view are more expensive – but what’s important is that beauty is actually nourishing and uplifting and restorative.

¹ All quotations from Dr. Esther Sternberg, unless otherwise noted, are from Krista Tippet, Host, *On Being*, “Esther Sternberg – The Science of Healing Places,” October 24, 2013 (transcript)

Sometimes, after dinner – maybe when the family wasn’t piling into the car to go watch the sunset – Esther Sternberg’s father would take the Bible down from the shelf and read the 23rd Psalm out loud. He wasn’t a particularly religious man, but he loved, especially, the opening lines:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
 He leadeth me beside the still waters.
 He restoreth my soul.

There it is: such an evocative word painting. We can see the healing place the psalmist describes. Dr. Sternberg says, “If illness and health are nouns, then healing is a verb.... [A] living being is constantly repairing itself against all of these different insults at a ... molecular level, at a cellular level, at an emotional level....” We are, she says, healed by beauty. Our souls are restored by beauty.

And memory of place is a key to *accessing* beauty in our lives. She says, The hippocampus “is a part of the brain that specializes in the memory of place.... [It integrates] all of [the] incoming sensory signals from the visual cortex, ... the auditory cortex, [and] ... the olfactory bulb. The hippocampal cells ... are actually called ‘place cells’ because they tell you where you are in the world.... [F]rom a neuroscience point of view, ... we do have an internal place that we can go....”

“... [Y]ou don’t need to go offline,” she continues “– I mean, off your brain’s line, not off the computer line – [you don’t have to go offline] for very long to ... reset things....”

“[I]f you feel your stress level mounting, and you just ... look at the trees and listen to the birds and be quiet for a few moments, [or if you just turn within and imagine your healing place,] ... [y]ou can bring ... down [your stress]. You can titrate it.... So you can actually teach yourself to go offline, to have that shift into a relaxation mode on a moment-to-moment basis. [You can go to a place] that helps you, [a healing place].... And then you can go back and focus on whatever it was you were doing.”

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To do good work in the world, and to really deepen spiritually, we need a way to be restored. Each of us carries the experience of beautiful places within us; if we can’t go to them, we can bring them to us, in our mind’s eye, and go to our places of refuge and healing.

Dr. Sternberg’s work asks a really important question of those of us – all of us – on a spiritual path: What are our healing places, our places of beauty and peace?

In July of 1845, Henry David Thoreau had moved to Walden Pond to “see,” he said, “if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”² For the rest of his life, whether he was there in body or only in spirit, Walden was his healing place. “...[O]f all the characters I have known, perhaps Walden wears best,” he writes. “... [I]t is ... unchanged, the same water which my youthful eyes fell on; all the change is in me. It has not acquired one permanent wrinkle after all its ripples.... It struck me again tonight, as if I had not seen it almost daily for more than twenty years, Why, here is Walden, ... the same liquid joy and happiness to its self, and its Maker, ay, and it may be to me....”³

Twenty-four years later, in June of 1869, naturalist and Sierra Club founder John Muir headed into the Sierras for the first time. He wrote, “We are now in the mountains, and they are in us, kindling enthusiasm, making every nerve quiver, filling every pore and cell of us. Our flesh-and-bone tabernacle seems transparent as glass to the beauty about us, as if truly an inseparable part of it, thrilling with the air and trees, streams, and rocks, in the waves of the sun – a part of all nature, neither old nor young, sick nor well, but immortal. Just now I can hardly conceive of any bodily condition dependent on food or breath any more than the ground or the sky.”⁴

Kem and I also love these places – Walden Pond and Yosemite – and I love the way that, even if I’m far away, even surrounded by a crowd at a noisy street corner, I can be there. The pond and the mountains and so many beautiful places are in us.

Where are your Walden or Yosemite? Where do you go – literally or figuratively – where do you go for beauty, to restore your soul?

Irish poet and philosopher John O’Donohue wrote, “When you beautify your mind, you beautify your world. You learn to see differently. In what seemed like dead situations, secret possibilities and invitations begin

² Henry David Thoreau, “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For,” *Walden*, p. 90

³ Thoreau, *op cit*, pp. 192-193

⁴ John Muir, “Through the Foothills with a Flock of Sheep,” *My First Summer in the Sierra*, p. 10

to open before you. In old suffering that held you long paralysed,⁵ you find new keys. When your mind awakens, your live comes alive, and the creative adventure of your soul takes off. Passion and compassion become your new companions. As St. Iraneus said in the second century, “The glory of G*d is the human person fully alive.”⁶

Beloved spiritual companions,
 may we listen, look, smell, taste, touch,
 and fill our lives with a vivid store of beauty.
 When we beautify our minds with places of refuge and healing,
 we beautify our world, and make ourselves strong
 – nourished and uplifted and restored –
 for good work in the world.
 May beauty and passion and compassion be our companions.
 May we be fully alive.

⁵ Sic

⁶ From the description of a talk John O’Donohue was scheduled to have given in Canada on March 30th, 2008. He died that January; these were some of his last words.